

# Committee on Resources

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## Witness Testimony

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### **Testimony by David Lillard, President American Hiking Society**

Committee on Resources' Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands  
June 10, 1997

My name is David Lillard, and I am the president of American Hiking Society, a national nonprofit organization serving 10,000 individual members and the more than 500,000 members of our 100 affiliated clubs.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the subcommittee today on the matter of amending the National Trails System Act by adding a new category of long-distance trail--National Discovery Trails, and by authorizing the American Discovery Trail as the first trail within that category.

#### Establishing the National Discovery Trail category within the National Trails System Act.

The National Trails System Act has made possible 20 long-distance, primarily multi-state trails. Eight of these, known as national scenic trails, were established primarily as hiking trails through backcountry and wilderness areas, while the 12 national historic trails mark sites along significant migration or travel routes of U.S. history. Americans have been well served by the investment in these trails, which receive more than 10 million visitors each year.

The demand for outdoor recreation in America is at an all-time high, but the types of facilities most needed has changed in recent years. As called for by President Ronald Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors, today's families need outdoor recreation opportunities closer to home. Also as outlined by President Reagan's Commission, trails and greenways provide cost-effective recreation and bring focus to local and regional park planning by linking existing parks and forests with the places where people live and work.

This idea of linking people with their parks and linking existing parks and trails with one another truly makes a "system" of our National Trails System, rather than a collection of trails. It is what makes the federal investment in parks and trails one which pays clear and lasting dividends to local communities. Yet, no long-distance trail designation within the current National Trails System Act encourages or accommodates trails which are developed for such purpose. The National Discovery Trail category fulfills the Reagan Commission's recommendation for such linkages.

In addition to linking existing parks and trails with one another and with communities, Discovery Trails by their intent also link outdoor recreation with local commerce. By bringing Discovery Trails into cities, small towns and suburbs, local businesses are provided both a regional focus for commercial activity and an ability to shape the trail in the interest of the community. Discovery Trails also promise to be a vehicle for promoting regional tourism--an opportunity already seized upon by the tourism offices in the states of Nebraska, Colorado and West Virginia. Although the economic benefits and primary usage of Discovery Trails would be local and regional, the new category of the National Trails System Act indeed recognizes

trail corridors that are truly nationally significant.

Discovery Trails are nationally significant because they provide the possibility of linkages among such regions as the mountains of Utah, the small towns of Iowa, and beaches of Delaware. They are nationally significant because they invite states and local governments to think cooperatively about a nationally significant resource while making their own decisions based upon their own needs. They are nationally significant because they allow Americans to discover for themselves the regional diversity that is America, a discovery that will engender an appreciation of shared American values and understanding of regional differences--whether east and west, or urban and rural. And Discovery Trails are nationally significant because they are a grand idea worthy of recognition by the United States Congress.

Although they are nationally significant, Discovery Trails do not require federal management on trail lands outside of federal acreage. In fact, the National Discovery Trail category requires a citizen-led nonprofit organization to support a discovery trail before it is even designated by Congress. The activities of the nonprofit administrator include: drafting a comprehensive plan for the trail in cooperation with the administering federal agency, coordinating the activities of local jurisdictions on trail standards and potential routes; encouraging the private sector to become involved in the development, promotion and management of the trail; and ensuring the ongoing, active involvement of citizens in the stewardship of, and decision making for the trail.

Still, there is an essential role for federal agencies -- that of the convenor, technical assistant and, when available and sought by states and local governments, funding through sources devoted to such purposes. The federal government has a vast range of expertise and experience that would help state, local and other federal decision makers, and the administering nonprofit organization coordinate their activities and planning. This allows federal agencies to do what they do best: manage recreation lands already held by the federal government and provide technical assistance to state and local agencies and volunteer organizations. This is a bold idea for federal involvement in national trails. It says to Americans: "If your community wants this trail and wants our assistance, we will participate in your efforts."

It also challenges states who develop Discovery Trails to utilize innovative means for conserving trail corridors, including conservation easements, voluntary transfer of development rights, privately funded land trusts and conservancies, or, for states and counties that so choose, purchasing from willing sellers parklands that accommodate the trail corridor.

This emphasis on linkages that make the most of the American investment in parks and trails, the reliance on local decision making, and the private-sector administration of National Discovery Trails have been enthusiastically embraced by the trail community and Members of this chamber, an enthusiasm illustrated by the 50 cosponsors of this measure.

#### Authorization of the American Discovery Trail within the new category.

The American Discovery Trail meets all of the criteria for National Discovery Trail designation in HR 588 and should, in the view of American Hiking Society, be the first trail listed under the category.

First the ADT meets the linkage criteria by linking areas within the boundaries of distinct metropolitan areas. For example, it connects Washington, D.C., with Cincinnati, and Kansas City with Denver. The American Discovery Trail also links other trails, making the first-ever effort to connect such Congressionally authorized trails as the North Country National Scenic Trail winding through Ohio with the

Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail crossing the mountains of California, as well as with hundreds of other trails in between.

Second, the trail meets the competent trailwide nonprofit organization criteria. The American Discovery Trail Society incorporated as a non-profit organization in the Commonwealth of Virginia in February 1996. The primary purpose of the organization is to conceive, create, develop and promote the American Discovery Trail and to educate the public in the use and appreciation of the trail. In the fall of 1996, the Society qualified as an exempt organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Membership is growing rapidly and there is an ADTS presence in each state through which the trail passes.

Clearly, at the local level people want this trail, and they have formed the ADT Society as an instrument of their efforts.

Third, the ADT meets the interstate criteria. It traverses 15 states and the District of Columbia. Already, the route is continuous and walkable -- in places on traditional pathways on federal lands or state parks, in places along quiet country roads, and in places along urban trails and sidewalks.

The American Discovery Trail is a nationally significant, grand idea. It presents new ways of getting big things done by putting them into the hands of the people who care most about them. It has generated excitement within states long underserved by federal recreation programs, such as Nebraska and Kansas and others. These states deserve our gratitude and encouragement, along with federal recognition and assistance on this important project.

The American Discovery Trail was well ahead of its time when it was conceived, but this Congress gives us great hope that its time has come.

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